



STATE and COUNTY FAIRS

Family Fun Across the USA

BY PHYLLIS MCINTOSH

On a warm summer day, there's nothing quite like the sights and sounds of a bustling state fair. Children's laughter mingles with the moos and oinks emanating from the livestock barns. Fresh-faced youngsters proudly parade their animals to the judging pavilion. Families stroll through nearby buildings to see who won blue ribbon prizes for the most colorful quilt, the best apple pie, or the most perfect tomatoes. At the grandstand, crowds gather to hear the latest country music group or marvel at drivers purposely crashing old cars—a spectacle known as a “demolition derby.” On the “midway,” flashing lights and blaring music lure the fearless to clamber onto thrill rides, while dozens of booths beckon passersby to try their luck at games of skill or test their stomachs with the latest deep-fried concoction.

About 150 million people attend the 3,000 agricultural fairs that take place each year throughout the United States. These events range from the gigantic State Fair of Texas, a 24-day extravaganza that boasts 3 million visitors, to the five-day South Dakota State Fair, which draws 135,000. Every state except tiny Rhode Island currently has a state fair, and some have more than one—at least in name. The folks of Belton, Texas, population 15,000, have dubbed their four-day event the Central Texas State Fair, though it certainly is not in the same league as *the* state fair in Dallas.

Far more numerous are the agricultural fairs sponsored by counties (local governmental units within states). Some, such as the Los Angeles (California) County Fair, are larger than many state fairs; others are small rural events, such as the three-day Beaver County Fair in Minersville, Utah, attendance 3,000.

Fairs are held year in, year out, rain or shine, at designated fairgrounds outfitted with permanent barns and exhibition buildings and encompassing plenty of space for the carnival rides and vendors that arrive for the fair. In most states, the annual ritual has been interrupted only by the direst of circumstances—war or emergencies such as a polio epidemic. Regardless of size or location, all fairs are eagerly-awaited celebrations of the nation's agricultural bounty, love of competition, and community spirit.

The History of Fairs

Fairs in the United States reflect the nation's agrarian roots. In fact, many state and county fairs still call themselves agricultural fairs and choose themes that are plays on farm-related words, such as "See Ewe at the Fair," "Mooove on out to the Fair," and "Go Hog Wild."

The so-called father of agricultural fairs was Elkanah Watson, a wealthy New England farmer and woolen mill owner who in 1807 exhibited a few of his Merino sheep in the Pittsfield, Massachusetts, town square in hopes of persuading local farmers to raise the breed for their fine wool. A few years later, Watson staged a more ambi-

tious exhibition that featured several hundred head of cattle, oxen, and sheep, and soon the idea caught on. The first official state fair was held in Syracuse, New York, in 1841; by the end of the 19th century almost every state had one or more agricultural fairs or exhibitions.

In the days before mass communication and easy travel, such fairs provided an opportunity for farm families to learn about the latest innovations in farm equipment and household appliances and to find out how their livestock, crops, and homemade products compared with those of their neighbors. The fair was also an eagerly awaited social event and vacation from the daily drudgery. Farmers would rise before dawn, load wagons with children and picnic baskets, and walk their livestock for miles to the fairgrounds.

Most of all, fairs were fun. In addition to exhibits and competitions, they offered entertainment, games, thrill rides, all sorts of foods, and various oddball attractions—a replica of the Statue of Liberty made out of ears of corn or a cow carved out of hundreds of pounds of butter.

While such curiosities are still popular today, fairs also have adapted to more sophisticated tastes and increasingly citified audiences. In fact, some of the largest fairs now are located in urban areas. The Los Angeles County Fair attracts more than a million visitors every year with its international marketplace, sit-down restaurants, wine education seminars, and exotic-themed flower and garden shows, in addition to the usual fair exhibits and activities.

Reflecting the increasing diversity among fairgoers, large fairs offer an array of ethnic foods and post signs in multiple languages. Big Tex, the 52-foot-tall talking statue that stands at the entrance of the State Fair of Texas now greets fairgoers in Spanish as well as English. Changing sensitivities dictate that some entertainment common at early fairs—such as striptease shows or displays of human oddities—are no longer acceptable.

Fairgrounds themselves have evolved into huge complexes that host hundreds of year-round events, such as trade shows, circuses, antiques and craft fairs, and home and garden exhibitions.



Colorful vegetables grace the display tables in a produce exhibit at the Iowa State Fair.

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Judges assess cattle at the Utah State Fair in Salt Lake City.

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The 277-acre Fair Park, home of the State Fair of Texas, boasts a music hall, the Cotton Bowl football stadium (site of a New Year's Day classic), and eight museums. With the largest collection of art deco exposition buildings in the United States, the park is a registered National Historic Landmark. Los Angeles County's Fairplex features a luxury hotel, scenic parks and picnic areas, an historic train exhibit, a horse racing track, and a world-class equine auction complex.

From Sheep to Sideshows

Urban or rural, large or small, state and county fairs still share certain characteristics that have guaranteed their popularity over the decades:

Animals. At every fair, visitors can stroll through livestock barns admiring breed after breed of cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry. Often, familiar animals are joined by more exotic species, such as llamas and ostriches, now being raised by trendier farmers. City and suburban children can meet farm animals up close at petting zoos and farm babies exhibits or, as at the Maryland State

Fair's birthing center, even watch calves and piglets being born.

Education. Education has always been a major focus of U.S. fairs, but the emphasis has shifted from showcasing the latest farm implements and hardiest livestock breeds to informing city dwellers about the sources of their food and fiber.

Today's exhibits also educate the public about such issues as raising crops for renewable energy, assuring the safety of foods, and getting the most out of the land with the aid of such technology as global positioning satellites. Other popular displays advise fairgoers on how to attract birds and butterflies to suburban gardens while discouraging pesky deer, squirrels, and raccoons from ruining their landscapes.

Health pavilions offer screenings to detect high blood pressure or diabetes and dispense information on how to prevent heart disease. Recreated pioneer villages and old-timers exhibits show what life was like in bygone days. Commercial vendors introduce the latest whirlpool bathtub or backyard playground apparatus, while



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Fairgoers examine the winner of the Giant Cabbage Weigh-off at the 2006 Alaska State Fair. The blue-ribbon cabbage weighed 74.5 pounds.

advocacy groups and political parties promote their causes and candidates.

Competitions. Americans love to compete, so it's only natural that contests of every imaginable sort have been a staple of fairs. Judges scrutinize hundreds upon hundreds of entries before awarding ribbons or cash prizes to those who have produced the handsomest sow or steer, the most scrumptious pies, cakes, and jams, the biggest pumpkins, loveliest flower arrangements, and the most exquisite needlework. Most fairs have their perennial winners, though few can compare with Alberta Dunbar of southern California, who has amassed more than 4,000 ribbons from recipe competitions at the California State Fair and numerous county fairs.

In the first half of the 20th century, fairs appealed to women with baby contests in which specialists scored infants on their health and behavior and awarded ribbons and prizes to the most "nearly perfect" cherubs. The baby contests are long gone, replaced by all sorts of frivolous competitions to identify who has the longest ponytail hairdo, blows the biggest bubblegum bubbles, tells the most outrageous lies, or eats the most hot dogs in the shortest time. Instead of farmers competing to see who has the strongest team of oxen or can plow the straightest furrow, men race one another on riding lawnmowers and vie for such titles as fastest air conditioner repairman.

Some fairs are famous for their unusual contests. The Alaska State Fair has a Giant Cabbage Contest (the winning specimen in 2000 weighed



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Contestant Number 10 hurries to put his pig back in the pen, after having driven around the track, in the Pig-N-Ford race at the Tillamook County Fair in Oregon.

in at a whopping 105 pounds). The Kentucky State Fair sponsors a popular Ugly Lamp Contest, accepting entries that were “made ugly” by their owners or simply “born ugly.” But the Tillamook County Fair in Oregon surely wins the prize for the weirdest contest of all. Its Pig-N-Ford Race requires contestants to grab a greased pig from a pen and, pig in hand, crank up the engine of an antique Model T Ford automobile, drive around a course, and return said pig to the pen. Should the pig escape mid-race, the driver must give chase and retrieve it before continuing.

Entertainment. Fairs have always prided themselves on offering “something for everyone” and in the early days specialized in entertainment most people would see nowhere else—high-wire walkers, hot air balloonists, stunt pilots, and mules diving off towers into tanks of water. Horse racing became popular at fairs after the Civil War, until the advent of automobiles led to even more thrilling auto races. Sideshows, so-called because they were relegated to the edge of the fairgrounds, presented the seamier fare, such as human and animal “freak shows” and “cooch shows” featuring scantily clad exotic dancers.

By the early 20th century, rides, games, food vendors, novelties, and even sideshows were concentrated in the heart of the fairgrounds known as the midway. The name originated with the World’s Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, which pioneered the concept of separating amusements from the exhibit space. At the exposition, amusements filled a mile-long strip in a park known as the Midway Plaisance, and before long, every fair had a “midway.” The biggest attraction along the Columbian Exposition midway was a new ride known as the Ferris wheel, which also has become a fixture at virtually every fair throughout the country.

The headline entertainment or show that caps off an evening at the fair takes place at the grandstand, an open area flanked on one side by large tiers of seats usually covered with a roof. Here, fairgoers gather to see celebrity performers or watch a horse or auto race, a demolition derby, or a rodeo, sometimes climaxed by a fireworks display.

Community involvement. Some state fairs are agencies of the state government, while others are run by local governments or nonprofit private organizations. But even if they have a full-time



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Visitors to the midway enjoy a thrilling amusement ride with a good view of the fairgrounds below.

staff and a reliable budget, all fairs depend heavily on local volunteers who contribute thousands of hours of labor and on local businesses that donate cash, goods, and services. In return, fairs showcase the best the community has to offer in agriculture, industry, business, and the arts.

A National Tradition

Today's families can choose from a staggering array of entertainment options—huge amusement theme parks, mega shopping malls, sports complexes, and multi-screen cinemas, not to mention television, DVDs, and video and Internet games. Yet, state and county fairs remain perennially popular. For many families, going to the fair is an annual tradition passed down through the generations.

Arthur Grace, who photographed dozens of fairs for his book, *State Fair*, summed it up well: “I couldn’t help thinking that if aliens ever landed on Earth and you only had a few hours to help them



© JAMES BRECHER

During a demolition derby, crowds in the grandstand cheer as cars crash into each other. The event continues until only one car is still running.

understand America, all you would have to do is take them to any state fair. For me, a state fair is a microcosm of America—in all its glory and weirdness—at any given point in time.”



4-H Symbol

© USDA

4-H: The Heart and Hands of the Fair

Scores of livestock, produce, and crafts exhibits at almost any fair are the handiwork of the members of 4-H, an organization that teaches leadership and life skills to more than 6.5 million young people across America. Stroll through the livestock barns and you will likely see farm youngsters bunking down with the animals they have proudly raised through 4-H. Above the stalls hand-drawn signs explain the breed and how it contributes to our food and fiber.

The four H's stand for Head, Heart, Hands, and Health and reflect the values of clear thinking, caring, service, and healthy living. Kids aged 9 through 19 participate by joining 4-H clubs, attending a 4-H camp, or participating in after-school 4-H programs. Clubs and individuals take on projects such as raising livestock, community service, gardening, or in this technological age, Web design.

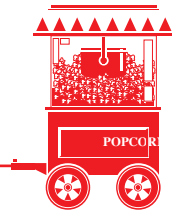
4-H traces its roots to the late 1800s, when people in different parts of the country launched agricultural projects aimed at ensuring the future of rural youth. One such program, formed in 1902 by an Ohio educator and Ohio State University, is considered the official beginning of the organization. Today, 4-H clubs are found in every U.S. state and territory, at American military installations abroad, and in 80 other countries.



© JIM BARON

Two 4-H members wait patiently for their turn to show their cows to state fair judges.

Fun Fair Foods



Americans love to eat, and there is no shortage of food choices for hungry fairgoers. Church and community groups sell traditional favorites such as fried chicken, pizza, barbecue, and corn on the cob. But fairs are renowned for sugary, fat-laden concoctions that no doctor would approve of and that most of us would not dream of eating elsewhere. These include:



Corn Dog
© StockUSA/Corbis

Cotton candy – brightly colored spun sugar wrapped around a cardboard cone.

Corn dogs – hot dogs on a stick dipped in cornmeal batter and immersed in hot oil, what Americans call “deep-fried.”

Funnel cakes – batter drizzled through a funnel in a circular pattern, deep-fried, and sprinkled with powdered sugar.

Sno-cones – scoops of crushed ice doused with flavored syrup and served in a paper cone



Cotton Candy
© BRAND X PICTURES/FOTORESEARCH

And the latest fad:

Deep-fried candy bars, cookies, etc. – Food vendors at fairs have discovered that it is possible to make junk foods junkier, and even more popular, by dipping them into batter and deep-frying them. Among the new fried favorites are Snickers candy bars, Oreo cookies, and the cream-filled snack cakes known as Twinkies.

In 2006, an enterprising fellow at the State Fair of Texas came up with the latest culinary delight, which quickly became a sensation at other fairs: Deep-fried Coca Cola. Coke-flavored batter is fried in hot oil, then drizzled with Coke syrup and topped with whipped cream, cinnamon sugar, and a cherry.



Funnel Cake
© LORAX/PHOTOS

Websites of Interest

Fairs and Expositions

<http://fairsandexpos.com/index.aspx>

This is the official website of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, which represents about 1,000 fairs in the United States.

Los Angeles County Fair

<http://www.fairplex.com/2006/homepage.asp>

This website of the Los Angeles County Fair, the nation's largest county fair, presents an interesting look at the attractions of an urban fair.

State Fair Recipes

<http://www.statefairrecipes.com>

Fun facts and trivia about the history of state fairs and the various foods associated with them can be found on this website.

State Fairs Across America

<http://cg.channel.aol.com/photo-gallery/state-fairs>

America Online takes a look at what's wacky and wonderful at state fairs across the United States.

Texas State Fair

<http://www.BigTex.com>

As the official site of the State Fair of Texas, the nation's largest, this webpage offers a wealth of information about the fair itself, the fairgrounds complex, and Big Tex, the 52-foot talking, waving statue that greets fairgoers.

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